

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PARIS
USLO PEKING
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 14014

LIMDIS

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SUBJECT: INDOCHINESE TROUBLES

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SUMMARY: A WESTERN DIPLOMAT IN BANGKOK, WHO IS SYMPATHETIC TO THE INDOCHINESE STATES, HAS PROVIDED US WITH A ROUNDLY PESSIMISTIC VIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AREA. SINO-VIET RELATIONS ARE SEEN AS AT A VERY LOW POINT. VIET-CAMBODIAN PROBLEMS ARE VICIOUS AND INTRACTABLE. VIET-NAM AND CHINA ARE SEEN AS COMPETING - ALONG WITH THE LESS CUNNING SOVIETS - FOR PARAMOUNT INFLUENCE IN LAOS. THESE TENSIONS AND RIVALRIES ARE EXAMINED AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF SEVERE DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES IN ALL THREE INDOCHINESE STATES. THE PESSIMISM OF THE DIPLOMAT SEEMS TO US WELL-FOUNDED. END SUMMARY.

1. VIET-CHINESE RELATIONS - A SENIOR WESTERN DIPLOMAT IN BANGKOK, WITH LEFTIST SYMPATHIES, COMMENTED TO US MAY 15

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THAT RELATIONS BETWEEN VIET-NAM AND THE PRC HAVE "REACHED THE POINT OF NO RETURN". HE DID NOT, HE SAID, MEAN THAT WAR WAS GOING TO OCCUR BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS, BUT THE OPEN ADMISSION OF BILATERAL DIFFICULTIES, FIRST IN VEILED REFERENCES BY HANOI FEB 20-21 TO PROVISION BY PEKING OF MAJOR WEAPONRY TO CAMBODIA, AND RECENT COMMENTS BY PRC OVERSEAS CHINESE ASSOCIATION HEAD LIAO CHENG-CHIH AND SRV POLITBURO MEMBER

XUAN THUY ON THE FLIGHT OF CHINESE FROM VIET-NAM, WERE BUT THE SURFACE MANIFESTATION OF SERIOUSLY DETERIORATED BILATERAL RELATIONS. THE DIPLOMAT RECALLED THAT THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT HAD BEEN DEVELOPING FOR YEARS BEFORE IT WAS MADE PUBLIC. SIMILARLY, THE OPEN SQUABBLING BETWEEN PEKING AND HANOI REPRESENTED A MAJOR CLEAVAGE IN THEIR RELATIONS. THIS POINT HAD BEEN CLEAR TO THE DIPLOMAT FOR SEVERAL MONTHS AS ENVOYS FROM PEKING AND HANOI IN PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DIPLOMAT HAD VOICED HARSH CRITICISM RESPECTIVELY, OF SRV AND PRC POLICIES.

2. BECAUSE OF THE OBVIOUS SENSIBLENESS OF MAINTAINING BALANCE IN ITS RELATIONS WITH PEKING AND MOSCOW, RECENT MOVES BY HANOI AGAINST THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN VIET-NAM, AT A TIME WHEN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO STATES ARE SERIOUSLY DETERIORATED, ARE ALMOST INCOMPREHENSIBLE. HANOI'S MOVES ARE A CLEAR AFFRONT TO PEKING. BASED ON REPORTS FROM HANOI, THE DIPLOMAT BELIEVES THAT HANOI HAS CREATED AN ATMOSPHERE WHICH IS TANTAMOUNT TO REQUIRING EXPULSION OF THE CHINESE. RUMORS OF POSSIBLE WAR BETWEEN CHINA AND VIET-NAM AND REPORTS OF MOVES AGAINST THE CHINESE "CAPITALIST TRADERS" IN THE SOUTH, HAVE PROVIDED AN ALARMING BACKDROP FOR DIRECT ACTIONS AND THREATS AGAINST THE 80,000 TO 100,000 CHINESE IN THE HANOI-HAIPHONG AREA. THE DIPLOMAT SUGGESTED THAT PHYSICAL VIOLENCE MAY HAVE EVEN BEEN EMPLOYED BY THE VIETNAMESE.

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3. THE MOVES OF COURSE ARE CONSISTENT WITH HANOI'S NEW ECONOMIC POLICIES BEING IMPLEMENTED THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH. HANOI IS PROCEEDING CORRECTLY IN TERMS OF ITS OWN IDEOLOGY. IN FACT, THE DIPLOMAT SAID, THESE ARE MOVES WHICH ARE THREE YEARS TOO LATE, IDEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING. WHILE THE DIPLOMAT DOES NOT REGARD THE SRV POLITBURO AS SPLIT FACTIONALLY, HE NOTED THAT IDEOLOGUE TRUONG CHINH MUST HAVE BEEN PROFOUNDLY SHOCKED TO VISIT THE SOUTH AND FIND THAT SAIGON IS LITTLE CHANGED FROM THREE YEARS AGO. THE RICH DELTA FARMERS ARE STILL RICH AND CAPITALISTIC. MOREOVER, OBSERVERS FROM VIET-NAM UNANIMOUSLY AGREE THAT THE WHOLE COUNTRY IS IN TERRIBLE SHAPE. LOOKED AT IN THIS VEIN, THE NEW POLICIES IN THE SOUTH ARE UNDERSTANDABLE AND CORRECT FROM HANOI'S PERSPECTIVE. COUNTERPART POLICIES IN THE NORTH, HOWEVER, AT THIS JUNCTURE OF SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES WITH CHINA, RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WISDOM OF THE LEADERSHIP IN HANOI. HANOI SEEMS TO BE UNABLE TO ESCAPE RIGOROUS, INFLEXIBLE PURSUIT OF FIXED IDEAS, THE DIPLOMAT COMMENTED. IN THIS RESPECT, THE SRV POLITBURO AND LAO DANG PARTY ARE JUST LIKE OTHER DOCTRINAIRE COMMUNIST PARTIES. HANOI SEEMS TO BE LOCKED INTO POLICIES

WHICH NO LONGER MAKE GOOD SENSE.

4. THE SOVIET ANGLE - THE RUSSIANS CLEARLY HOPE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION TO EXACERBATE FURTHER TENSIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND VIET-NAM. MOSCOW IS CERTAINLY, THE DIPLOMAT SAID, URGING VIET-NAM TO ACT MORE AGGRESSIVELY AGAINST CAMBODIA. THE DIPLOMAT EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE BLIND COURSE ON WHICH HANOI IS EMBARKED WILL RESULT IN GROWING SOVIET INFLUENCE IN VIET-NAM. DESPITE PROUD NATIONALISM, HANOI COULD ALMOST INADVERTENTLY MOVE MUCH FARTHER TOWARD MOSCOW THAN IS IN VIETNAMESE INTEREST. THE ONLY CONCEIVABLE OTHER EXPLANATION IS THAT HANOI MAY HAVE DECIDED THAT (A) THE SOVIET LINE IS THE CORRET LINE, (B) THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP OF THE PRC IS AN ABERRATION, AND (C) THE LEADERSHIP

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IN PEKING WILL INEVITABLY BE OVERTHROWN, TO BE REPLACED BY PRO-MOSCOW LEADERSHIP. WHATEVER THE EXPLANATION, HANOI MAY INCREASINGLY IDENTIFY ITS INTERESTS WITH THOSE OF MOSCOW, DESPITE THE COST IN RELATIONS WITH BOTH CHINA AND THE WEST.

5. AT THIS POINT, THE DIPLOMAT MADE A PLEA. HE DESCRIBED THE CURRENT SITUATION AS AN OPTIMAL MOMENT FOR WASHINGTON TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HANOI'S ISOLATION AND TO NORMALIZE US-SRV RELATIONS. HE SEEMED TO BELIEVE THAT, US CONGRESSIONAL ATTITUDES NOTWITHSTANDING, SUFFICIENT COMPATIBILITY OF INTERESTS IN HANOI AND WASHINGTON COULD PERMIT DEVELOPMENT OF A FORMULA FOR NORMALIZATION. HE MADE NO SPECIFIC SUGGESTION AS TO WHAT SUCH A FORMULA WOULD INCLUDE. THIS MIGHT BE THE ONLY WAY TO PREVENT THE DRIFT BY HANOI TOWARD MOSCOW, A GOAL BOTH THE US AND HIS OWN COUNTRY SHARED, THE DIPLOMAT ASSERTED.

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6. CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA - CAMBODIA HAS, OF COURSE, BEEN THE NEMESIS OF HANOI. THE VIETNAMESE WERE STUNNED WHEN PHON PENH PUBLICIZED IN DECEMBER BILATERAL VIET-CAMBODIAN DIFFICULTIES. THE CAMBODIANS HAVE DEFENDED THEMSELVES FAR BETTER THAN HANOI ANTICIPATED. THE CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA HAS ALSO OF COURSE PRECIPITATED A BREAKDOWN WITH CHINA. HANOI'S DILEMMA WILL YIELD TO NO EASY SOLUTION. IN THE OPINION OF THE DIPLOMAT, HANOI HAS NO IDEA HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS INTRACTABLE SITUATION. A MILITARY STRIKE AGAINST PHNOM PENH MAKES NO SENSE. THE VIETNAMESE "PEACE PROPOSAL" HAS FOUNDERED. HANOI SEEMS TO BE COUNTING ON SUBVERSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE, DIRECTED FROM VIET-NAM, TO OVERTHROW THE POL POT REGIME.

7. FOR THE MOMENT, HOWEVER, POL POT'S REGIME SEEMS FIRMLY IN PLACE. IN THE LONGER RUN, THE DIPLOMAT CONCLUDED, THERE ARE FORCES AT WORK TO CHANGE THE REGIME. DESPITE ITS SEEMING CURRENT STRENGTH, THE PHNOM PENH REGIME IS ACTUALLY FRAGILE. NUMERICALLY EXTREMELY LIMITED, ITS RULE, BY
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TERROR, ENJOYS NO POPULAR BASE. ALTHOUGH SUBVERSION SUPPORTED FROM HANOI COULD FACILITATE A CHANGE IN PHNOM PENH, IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE A SUCCESSOR REGIME WHICH WOULD BE "PRO-VIETNAMESE". PASSIONS ALREADY AROUSED PROBABLY GUARANTEE THAT A SUCCESSOR REGIME WOULD BE THOROUGHLY "CAMBODIAN", AND, PRESUMABLY, COMMUNIST. IN ANY CASE, "THE REGIME IN PHNOM PENH MUST GO", THE DIPLOMAT STATED UNEQUIVOCALLY.

8. FOLLOWING FROM THIS POINT, THE DIPLOMAT COMMENTED THAT HANOI HAS GREATLY MISJUDGED OTHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE SRV. THIS MISJUDGMENT STEMS FROM THE SUCCESS HANOI ENJOYED IN GAINING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT DURING THE WAR YEARS. HANOI HAS MISINTERPRETED OTHER NATIONS' CALL FOR A PEACEFUL SOLUTION TO THE VIET-CAMBODIAN CONFLICT AS SUPPORT FOR HANOI. IN FACT, THERE IS LITTLE SUCH SUPPORT. FOR EXAMPLE, HANOI CONCLUDED THAT FONGMIN NGUYEN DUY TRINH'S VISIT TO

THE ASEAN STATES (EXCEPT SINGAPORE) IN DECEMBER, 1977, RESULTED IN UNDERSTANDING AND, THEREFORE, SUPPORT FOR VIET-NAM IN ITS CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA. IN REALITY, BANGKOK PREFERS ANY REGIME IN PHNOM PENH TO A PRO-VIETNAMESE ONE. MAKING THIS ABUNDANTLY CLEAR, FONMIN UPPADIT HAS BEEN ALMOST UNSEEMLY IN HIS BENIGN STATEMENTS AND COMMENTS REGARDING CAMBODIA. UPPADIT'S POINT IS, NEVERTHELESS, CLEAR, THE DIPLOMAT SAID. DESPITE THEIR DISTASTE FOR THE LEADERS IN PHNOM PENH, THE OTHER ASEAN CAPITALS ALSO OPPOSE A VIETNAMESE VASSAL STATE IN CAMBODIA. EUROPEAN REACTION IS SIMILARLY SUPPORTIVE OF THE CONTINUED INDEPENDENCE OF THE SMALL UNDERDOG, CAMBODIA.

9. THE CONTEST IN LAOS - THE DIPLOMAT NOTED THAT SEVERAL EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS WERE KEENLY INTERESTED IN LAOS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN LAOS. THE
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CONTEST FOR POWER IN LAOS IS A POINT OF MAJOR INTEREST. EVEN PM KAYSONE CONFIDED TO THE DIPLOMAT LATE LAST YEAR THAT THE CONTEST AMONG THE VIETNAMESE, CHINESE AND RUSSIANS FOR INFLUENCE IN VIENTIANE IS EMBARRASSING. IN THE LONGER RUN, THE RUSSIANS WILL LOSE, WHICH THE DIPLOMAT SAID HE WOULD WELCOME. THE REAL CONTEST IS BETWEEN CHINA AND VIET-NAM. ALTHOUGH HANOI DOMINATES FOR THE MOMENT, THE DIPLOMAT ANTICIPATES IN REASING EFFORTS ON PEKING'S PART TO SUPPLANT VIETNAMESE (AND RUSSIAN) INFLUENCE IN LAOS. THE DIPLOMAT DOUBTS THAT PEKING WILL CEDE ITS INFLUENCE IN NORTHERN LAOS, WHETHER THE ROAD-BUILDING PROGRAM IS TERMINATED OR NOT. HE IS INTRIGUED WITH BUT SKEPTICAL OF RESORTS THAT THE PRC IS SUPPORTING THE ALAOTIAN RESISTANCE FORCES. SHYING FROM SPECIFICS ON HOW PEKING MAY PROCEED, HE ANTICIPATES, NEVERTHELESS, A GROWING CHINESE CHALLENGE TO THE VIETNAMESE POSITION IN LAOS.

10. COMMENT: WE ARE AS PERPLEXED AS THIS DIPLOMAT AND THE REST OF THE BANGKOK DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY, BY THE SEEMINGLY DELIBERATE AFFRONT PRESENTED BY HANOI'S RECENT POLICIES TO THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN NORTH VIET-NAM AND IMPLICITLY TO THE PRC. WE WONDER IF PEKING'S NEWLY STATED OVERSEAS CHINESE POLICY PLAYED ANY ROLE IN THE FLIGHT OF CHINESE TO THE PRC. NEVERTHELESS, THE MOVE BY HANOI AND ITS TIMING SEEM TO US UNUSUALLY MYOPIC AND A MISJUDGMENT ON HANOI'S PART. THE STRAIN IN SINO-VIET RELATIONS SEEMS SEVERE, BUT WE DOUBT THAT HANOI IS PREPARED TO ACCEPT RUPTURE IN ITS RELATIONS WITH PEKING OR THAT A "POINT OF NO RETURN" HAS BEEN REACHED. CHINA'S SUPPORT OF CAMBODIA WILL CONTINUE TO ADD TO SINO-VIET TENSIONS, AND WE, LIKE THE DIPLOMAT, ANTICIPATE A MORE AGGRESSIVE ATTEMPT IN THE LONGER RUN ON PEKING'S PART TO SUPPLANT VIETNAMESE AND SOVIET INFLUENCE

IN VIENTIANE. AT THE SAME TIME, WE EXPECT THAT HANOI WILL, NEVERTHELESS, TRY TO LIMIT DAMAGE TO THE BASIC RELATIONSHIP WITH PEKING.

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11. HANOI MAY DRIFT COMPARATIVELY CLOSER TO MOSCOW, BUT WE ALSO ARE CONVINCED THAT THE VIETNAMESE WILL CONTINUE TO GUARD JEALOUSLY THEIR INDEPENDENCE VIS-A-VIS THE RUSSIANS. AS TENSIONS IN SINO-VIET TIES PERSIST, AND AS THE INCENTIVE FOR MOSCOW TO PROVIDE ECONOMIC SUPPORT TO COUNTER CHINESE INFLUENCE MIGHT DIMINISH, VIET-NAM'S GROWING ECONOMIC NEEDS WILL FORCE HANOI, PERHAPS EVEN MORE URGENTLY, TO LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVES. DESPITE AND PARTLY BECAUSE OF CREDIBLE REPORTS OF DISILLUSIONMENT ON THE PART OF HANOI WITH AMOUNTS OF EUROPEAN AID, TRADE, ETC. AND, ON THE EUROPEANS' PART, WITH THE ABILITY OF THE SRV TO ABSORB FOREIGN TECHNOLOGY AND AID, THE ECONOMIC/TECHNOLOGY GAP WILL REMAIN FOR HANOI. ECONOMIC FAILURE AT HOME AND DISMAL PROGRESS IN INTEGRATING THE SOUTH INTO A NATIONAL, SOCIALIST SYSTEM SEEM LIKELY TO LEAD HANOI TO PURSUE MORE DOCTRINAIRE AND TOUGHER POLICIES DOMESTICALLY. HOWEVER, WE BELIEVE THAT THE VIETNAMESE, AT LEAST FOR THE PRESENT, STILL HOPE FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AMERICAN CONNECTION AS A PROMISE OF COUNTERBALANCING BOTH SOVIET AND CHINESE INFLUENCE IN THE SRV. WHITEHOUSE

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